

Citizens Invested in Transitioning Youth (CITY) is a volunteer organization comprised of retired professionals with expertise in child welfare, education, mentoring, the arts, mental health, transition services and juvenile probation.

THE OHANA PROJECT

The Ohana Project is an effort of CITY. The project came about because of relationships with transition aged youth, some in an Ohana situation, and the inherent challenges and rewards of this type of living arrangement. We are shining a light on a small but vulnerable family unit within DCFS' sphere of supervision: ***young adult alumni dependents or wards, who are caring for their younger dependent brothers and sisters.***

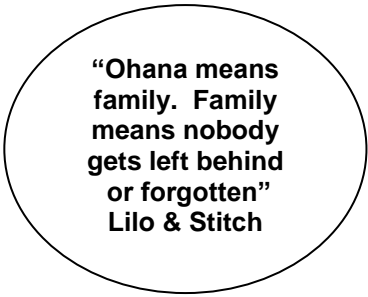
The Purpose of this Project is to:

- Acknowledge and quantify the number of adult former dependent siblings caring for their younger dependent siblings;
- Pinpoint their cities of residence to determine if there are high concentrations of these households in any one jurisdiction;
- Understand household composition: how many, what ages and genders;
- Review the literature to determine if another jurisdiction successfully serves this population;
- Conduct local Focus Groups with sibling caregivers to identify and prioritize needs and service gaps; and,
- Identify resources and develop recommendations to meet critical needs.

The Problem:

Both the DCFS 2013-2014 Biennial Report and the 2014 Final Report of the Los Angeles County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection address the general topic of kinship care. The Blue Ribbon Report specifically identified potential areas for improvement including: the need for more resources, affordable legal aid, respite care or child care, funding parity through more flexible strategies, etc. DCFS supports the Parents in Partnership program to offer parental peer support to the system's parents, and pregnant and parenting teens are acknowledged and served but nowhere could we find a similar effort to acknowledge and serve siblings in a parenting role.

While there is significant attention given to kinship placements, the majority of relative caregivers are older adults, typically grandparents. A service delivery model has been created to serve these providers by the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services and organizations such as Grandparents as Parents, but there is not a local model for serving sibling caregivers of dependent siblings.



**"Ohana means family. Family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten"
Lilo & Stitch**

DCFS tracks relative placements but does not distinguish those who fall into this “Ohana” category. Generally, these caregivers are young adults in their early to mid-twenties who themselves have been court dependents or wards. Their siblings may range from latency age through their teens. Social Workers and the Court have seen fit to reunite these children with their older brother or sister but these families are buried in the kinship statistics and not isolated into a distinct category. The needs of these young caregivers do not seem to be addressed in any formalized way. They are in a different stage of life than their older caregiver counterparts. They may be poorly equipped to deal with their parents who may also still be in the siblings’ lives, they are struggling to make their own way in life in school or in the workforce, they may lack a resource network, positive parental role models, financial stability, reliable transportation, etc., and yet their desire to keep their family together motivates them to forge ahead in the best way they can.

The Ohana Project Design:

In 2014, CITY reached out to DCFS to get an idea of how many such families exist in this county but was told that this type of information is not collected. Informal estimates were put forth but there was no way to find out if this is a significant population, if such families are more likely to be in one part of the county, what kind of services were being provided or what significant needs remained.

CITY members, along with some former foster youth, would like to reach out to Ohana caregivers in focus groups in different parts of the county, conduct needs assessments, identify existing services, and strategize ways to meet these families’ unique needs. Some service strategies we might consider could be offering mentoring to the caregiving sibling; establishing a facilitated support group where young adults in this situation get together to discuss challenges, consider solutions and celebrate successes; developing a coaching program including parenting practices, budgeting, etc. Some members of CITY have expressed interest in assisting with this.

In order to hold focus groups, CITY will need information from DCFS on the demographics and numbers of these families and a willingness to distribute information to the caregiving siblings about the project and the focus group invitations.

Conclusion:

You cannot solve a problem that hasn’t been quantified. If the Department does not know how many such families exist, or their special service needs, the quality of the placement and therefore, child safety and stability may be jeopardized.

Even if the numbers are small, this is a population that needs attention and support, and CITY is willing to work collaboratively on a solution.